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Organization Development: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

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Abstract

The question is often asked why study history of a particular field of study. The answer is that if you know how a field emerged and developed, you will understand the foundation and why it was studied. Often without the knowledge of a field's foundation, the direction of where a field is going may be lost. A literature review was conducted on the beginnings and, subsequent development, of organization development. The first section outlines the history of organization development from its early development. This historical section is composed of a discussion of the influential people involved in the evolution of organization development. The second section discusses the importance of organization development and its application to an organization along with the elements critical to its successful implementation. And the third discusses the direction of organization development today.

Organization development is an ongoing, systematic process to implement effective change in an organization. Organization Development is known as both a field of applied behavioral science focused on understanding and managing organizational change and as a field of scientific study and inquiry. It is interdisciplinary in nature and draws on sociology, psychology, and theories of motivation, learning, and personality. Why study the development of Organization Development (OD)? When you understand the historical perspective of OD, you can understand the reasons behind the research involved and why it has developed a strong importance in today's work environment and what it may do for organizations in the future.

History of Organization Development

Early development of Organization Development

Kurt Lewin played a key role in the evolution of organization development as it is known today. Kurt Lewin (1898 - 1947) is widely recognized as the founding father of Organization Development (OD), although he died before the concept became current in the mid-1950s (Lewin, 1958). From Lewin came the ideas of group dynamics, and action research which underpin the basic OD process as well as providing its collaborative consultant/client ethos (Massarik and Pei-Carpenter, 2002). Institutionally, Lewin founded the Research Center for Group Dynamics at MIT, which moved to Michigan after his death. RCGD colleagues were among those who founded the National Training Laboratories (NTL), from which the T-group and group-based OD emerged. In the UK, working as close as was possible with Lewin and his colleagues, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations was important in developing systems theories (Beckhard, 1969).

Important too was the joint TIHR journal Human Relations, although nowadays the Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences is seen as one of the leading OD journals.

As early as World War II, Lewin experimented with a **collaborative change** process (involving himself as consultant and a client group) based on a three-step process of **planning, taking action, and measuring** results (Lewin, 1958). This was the forerunner of action research, an important element of OD, which will be discussed later. Lewin then participated in the beginnings of laboratory training, or T-groups, and, after his death in 1947, his close associates helped to develop **survey-research methods** at the University of Michigan (Beckhard, 1969). These procedures became important parts of OD as developments in this field continued at the National Training Laboratories and in growing numbers of universities and private consulting firms across the country.

The failure of off-site laboratory training to live up to its early promise was one of the important forces stimulating the development of OD (Lewin, 1958). Laboratory training is learning from a person's "here and now" experience as a member of an ongoing training group. Such groups usually meet without a specific agenda (Johnson, 1976). Their purpose is for the members to learn about themselves from their spontaneous "here and now" responses to an ambiguous hypothetical situation (Beckhard, 1969). Problems of leadership, structure, status, communication, and self-serving behavior typically arise in such a group. The members have an opportunity to learn something about themselves and to practice such skills as listening, observing others, and functioning as effective group members (Johnson, 1976).

As formerly practiced (and occasionally still practiced for special purposes), laboratory training was conducted in "stranger groups," or groups composed of

individuals from different organizations, situations, and backgrounds (Lewin, 1958). A major difficulty developed, however, in transferring knowledge gained from these "stranger labs" to the actual situation "back home". This required a transfer between two different cultures, the relatively safe and protected environment of the T-group (or training group) and the give-and-take of the organizational environment with its traditional values (Beckhard, 1969). This led the early pioneers in this type of learning to begin to apply it to "family groups" — that is, groups located within an organization. From this shift in the locale of the training site and the realization that culture was an important factor in influencing group members (along with some other developments in the behavioral sciences) emerged the concept of organization development (Johnson, 1976).

Cummings and Worley (2009) state that Kurt Lewin was also involved in the second movement that led to OD's emergence as a practical field of social research. This second background refers to the processes of action research and survey feedback, both important in the development of OD as a legitimate field of study (French and Bell, 1973). The action research contributions began in the 1940s with studies conducted by social scientists John Collier, Kurt Lewin, and William Whyte (Beckhard, 1969). They discovered that research needed to be closely linked to action if organization members were to use it to manage change (Beckhard, 1969).

Cummings and Worley (2009) also noted that a key component of most action research studies was the systematic collection of survey data that was fed back to the client organization. Following Lewin's death in 1947, his Research Center for Group Dynamics at MIT moved to Michigan and joined with the Survey Research Center as part

of the Institute for Social Research (Beckhard 1969). The institute was headed by Rensis Likert, a pioneer in developing scientific approaches to attitude surveys. His doctoral dissertation at Columbia University developed the widely used 5-point "Likert Scale."

Another development which came about because of research on managerial and organizational effectiveness was Blake and Mouton's Grid Organization Development. Data gathered on organizational excellence from 198 organizations located in the United States, Japan and Great Britain found that the two foremost barriers to excellence were planning and communications (Beckhard 1969). When they researched these dimensions further to know more about the root causes, it developed in a normative model of leadership called the Managerial Grid (Cummings and Worley, 2009).

In the late 1960s organizational development was implemented in organizations via consultants, but was relatively unknown as a theory of practice and had no common definition among its practitioners (Johnson, 1976). Richard Beckhard, an authority on organizational development and change management, defined organizational development as "an effort, planned, organization-wide, and managed from the top, to increase organization effectiveness and health through planned interventions in the organization's processes, using behavioral-science knowledge" (Beckhard 1969).

Based on the research of Eric Trist and his colleagues at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London, early practitioners in Great Britain, Ireland, Norway, and Sweden developed work designed aimed at better integrating technology and people (Cummings and Worley, 2009). These Quality of Work Life (QWL) programs generally involved joint participation by unions and management in the design of work and resulted in work designs aimed at better integrating technology and people. Cummings and

Worley (2009) stated that as they programs migrated to America, a variety of concepts and techniques were adopted and the approach tended to be more mixed than in Europe. Two definitions of QWL emerged with the first being defined in terms of people's reaction to work, particularly individual outcomes related to job satisfaction and mental health. The second viewed it as an approach or method to be used as specific techniques and approached for improving work. The high profile work at the General Motors-United Auto Workers project at Tarrytown and the Gaines Pet Food plant project drew much attention to very specific approaches for making work better (Beckhard, 1969). However the difficult economy and inflation took the wind out of the QWL sails. Because of growing international competition faced by the United States and the low cost and high quality goods entering the markets management began to look again at ways to improve employee productivity and satisfaction. Today these programs are usually looked at as employee involvement (EI) under the names of total quality and six sigma programs rather than QWL. It was from these roots that the ideas of employee involvement and employee empowerment came into being and are still in use today (French and Bell, 1973).

In 1981 was written the first Organization Development Code of Ethics. It was published in the O.D. Institute's monthly newsletter and people were asked for comments. A revised version was published in the 1983 edition of The International Registry of O.D. Professionals and O.D. Handbook. In the fall of 1981, Dr. William Gellermann, took on the task of writing and revising and rewriting The O.D. Code of Ethics in order to develop a code that could be used worldwide by O.D. people in all kinds of settings. It

has now gone through some 22 revisions and has been translated into at least four languages.

Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s organizational development became a more established field with courses and programs being offered in business, education, and administration curricula. In the 1990s and 2000s organizational development continued to grow and evolve and its influences could be seen in theories and strategies such as total quality management (TQM), team building, job enrichment, and reengineering (Bradford and Burke, 2005).

Why is Organization Development Important?

Organization development takes into consideration how the organization and its constituents or employees function together. Does the organization meet the needs of its employees? Do the employees work effectively to make the organization a success? How can the symbiotic relationship between employee satisfaction and organizational success be optimized? Organization development places emphasis on the human factors and data inherent in the organization-employee relationship (Bradford and Burke, 2005).

Organization development strategies can be used to help employees become more committed and more adaptable, which ultimately improves the organization as a whole.

The organization development process is initiated when there is a need, gap, or dissatisfaction within the organization, either at the upper management level or within the employee body (French and Bell, 1973). Ideally, the process involves the organization in its entirety, with evidenced support from upper management and engagement in the effort by all members from each level of the organization (deKlerk, 2007).

To launch the process, consultants with experience in organization development and change management are often utilized (Burke, 2004). These consultants may be internal to the company or external, with the cautionary understanding that internal consultants might be too entrenched in the existing company environment to effectively coordinate and enforce the action plans and solutions required for successful change (Burke, 2004).

Data analysis through task forces, interviews, and questionnaires can illuminate likely causes for disconnects throughout an organization (Bradford and Burke, 2005). These gaps can then be analyzed, an action plan formed, and solutions employed. This is by no means a linear process, nor is it a brief one (Waclawski and Church, 2002). Feedback from all constituents should be elicited throughout the process and used to make adjustments to the action plan as necessary. Constant monitoring during the entire implementation effort is important for its success and acceptance (Burke, 2004).

Today, the field of organization development is being strongly influenced by the globalization of the world's economy and the continuing growth of technology. It is being carried out in many more countries and in many more organizations operating on a worldwide basis (French and Bell, 1973). Additionally, organization development must adapt itself to the technologies being used in many organizations as well (Cummings and Worley, 2009). The growth of professional organizations dedicated to using the process of organization development has increased exponentially as more and more organizations realize the need. The field continues to develop new theories, researchers, and practitioners who are continuing the work of the early pioneers and applying those programs to contemporary issues and global conditions (Bradford and Burke, 2005).

The Future of Organization Development

There are contradictory opinions about the status and future prospects of organizational development. Is it a theory whose time has come and gone? Does its basis in behavioral science, a "soft" science, make it unappealing? What are the challenges for the future?

An article by Bunker, Alban, and Lewicki (2004) proposes six areas that could revitalize the field of organizational development in the future: virtual teams, conflict resolution, work group effectiveness, social network analysis, trust, and intractable conflict. These authors suggest that focusing on these areas will help bridge the gap between research theory (i.e., academics) and practice (i.e., consultants). Getting these two groups to communicate with each other will benefit both groups and promote organizational development efforts (Bunker, Alban, and Lewicki, 2004).

In a survey conducted by Church, Waclawski, and Berr (2002), twenty individuals involved in the study and practice of organizational development were questioned about their perspectives and predictions on the future of the field. The most in-demand services, according to those polled, are:

executive coaching and development
team building and team effectiveness
facilitating strategic organizational change
systemic integration
diversity and multiculturalism.

They list the daily challenges in the field as the need for speed, resistance to change, interpersonal skills and awareness, and differentiating organizational

development, which refers to the variety of definitions of organizational development among practitioners and how this impacts consultants, clients, and the clients' needs (deKlerk, 2007).

In recent years, serious questioning has emerged about the relevance of OD to managing change in modern organizations. The need for "reinventing" the field has become a topic that even some of its "founding fathers" are discussing critically (Bradford and Burke, 2005). With this call for reinvention and change, scholars have begun to examine organizational development from an emotion-based standpoint.

deKlerk (2007) writes about how emotional trauma can negatively affect performance. Due to downsizing, outsourcing, mergers, restructuring, continual changes, invasions of privacy, harassment, and abuses of power, many employees experience the emotions of aggression, anxiety, apprehension, cynicism, and fear, which can lead to performance decreases. deKlerk (2007) also suggests that in order to heal the trauma and increase performance, O.D. practitioners must acknowledge the existence of the trauma, provide a safe place for employees to discuss their feelings, symbolize the trauma and put it into perspective, and then allow for and deal with the emotional responses (Wheatley, Tannenbaum, Griffin, and Quade, 2003).

More recently, new approaches such as Real-Time Strategic C. (Jacobs) and Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperider) have come to the fore (Bradford and Burke, 2005). These put an emphasis on finding new ways of engaging more people in dealing with the changes faced by their organization through dialogue and conversation (Wheatley, Tannenbaum, Griffin, and Quade, 2003).

Summary and Conclusions

The opinions on the future direction of the field vary among its practitioners. Nevertheless, the continuing interest in and value of optimizing an organization's needs and goals with the needs, wants, and personal satisfaction of its employees indicate that organizational development will continue to be relevant to and vital for organizational change in the future, either in its present form or through evolution into other theories and practices.

As the world becomes smaller the management in all corners of the globe face continuing competitive pressures for low cost and high quality goods, it is imperative that companies look at the necessity of understanding and developing organization development programs. In today's global economy, the need for the development of internal equity (meaning that the workforce) is now more important than ever before. To turn a blind eye to the realities of today is the beginning of the fall of business throughout the world. I believe that continued research on the effectiveness of Organization Development is needed to show that it is a legitimate field of study and has important implications to organizations around the world.

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